

8 April 1965

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM: Status of Soviet Military Assistance to North Vietnam

1. Two months have passed since the Soviet government announced on 9 February that the USSR would "take further measures to safeguard the security and strengthen the defense capabilities of the DRV." The joint statement two days later at the end of Kosygin's visit to North Vietnam said an agreement had been reached on measures to "consolidate" the DRV's defenses. Despite statements by Kosygin in late February and by Brezhnev on 23 March that this agreement was being implemented, there is still no evidence that any significant Soviet military aid has arrived in North Vietnam or that shipments are en route outside Soviet frontiers.

2. Although it is impossible to confirm allegations over the past month by Soviet and pro-Soviet spokesmen that the Chinese have obstructed the passage of Soviet equipment by both air and rail, the high stakes involved in the Soviet aid commitment lend some credibility to these charges. It was virtually inevitable that Moscow's bid

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to increase its influence in Hanoi through stronger political and military support should become a major issue in the Sino-Soviet conflict.

3. The Soviet leaders almost certainly anticipated that their pledge, however qualified and ambiguous, to strengthen North Vietnam's defense potential would at some point encounter determined Chinese opposition. The charges of Chinese obstructionist tactics which the Soviets have conveyed to neutralist governments, foreign Communist parties, and the foreign press are undoubtedly cast in terms calculated to have the greatest effect in discrediting the Chinese and provoking discord between Peiping and Hanoi. It is unlikely, however, that the USSR would risk circulating these charges if it were not prepared to support them with some "factual" foundation, however distorted or exaggerated. Outright fabrications would expose the Soviets to damaging Chinese counter charges of treachery and cowardice and of attempting to renege on their pledge to Hanoi. The dangers in such tactics have been underscored by Peiping's accusations that Moscow is attempting to sacrifice North Vietnam's interests by proposing "peace talks."

4. At the same time, it seems quite possible that the Russians deliberately provoked Chinese obstruction by

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making unreasonable and obviously unacceptable demands for unrestricted transit rights and facilities. The Soviets may well have adopted an uncompromising line, stressing the great urgency of immediate deliveries of defensive armaments to the embattled North Vietnamese. The Chinese almost certainly would rebuff this kind of an approach.

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opportunity to demonstrate that Soviet access to North Vietnam is dependent on their sufferance and to insist on detailed arrangements which would at least imply the right to deny Soviet transit if the Russians abused or violated these arrangements.

5. Although Soviet accounts of Kosygin's talks in Peiping in February claim that the question of coordinating "efforts to help the Vietnamese people" was discussed, there is no evidence that any meaningful agreement was reached. If the Russians did, in fact, confront the Chinese in early March with demands for unrestricted transit rights, it seems quite probable that Peiping would counter by insisting on negotiations to work out detailed arrangements.

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The Chinese may have calculated that they could pursue this course carefully enough to enable them to impose effective limits on the expansion of Soviet influence in North Vietnam without damaging their own relations *WITH Hanoi.*

6. The Chinese would run considerable risk of alienating the North Vietnamese if their actions could be reasonably construed as arbitrary interference with significant Soviet shipments. They could logically argue for a short time, however, that shipments had to be subject to certain controls so that their transportation facilities were not overloaded. They might also have been helped by a Soviet reluctance to hurry in the very military equipment--SAMS with Soviet personnel and high performance aircraft--that the North Vietnamese felt was necessary. Restrictions for a time on Soviet aid shipments which were of a lesser order of priority for North Vietnam would not bring forth from Hanoi the outraged reaction that could be expected if such military equipment were stopped. While the Soviets were attempting to capitalize by spreading ^Tseries of alleged Chinese obstruction of Soviet aid, the Chinese would emphasize that the Soviets were only willing to send minor help to Vietnam. This is the turn Chinese propaganda has in fact taken and it is unlikely that they would risk circulating these charges if they were not prepared to support them.

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7. A Chinese demand for negotiations would place the Russians in the embarrassing position of having to decide whether or not to acquiesce in Peiping's claim to impose conditions on Soviet shipments as the price for making good on their commitment to Hanoi. Moscow, of course, had the option of circumventing Chinese interference with air and land access by resorting to shipments by the sea route. Although sea deliveries would provide the most efficient method for transporting the substantial quantities of heavy equipment required for any significant improvement in the DRV's defense capability, the Russians apparently have rejected this option so far for three main reasons. It would mean the abandonment of the primary political warfare objective of exploiting alleged Chinese blockage of air and land routes to discredit Peiping in the world Communist movement generally and in Hanoi, in particular. It would also constitute a humiliating admission of Soviet inability to obtain Chinese cooperation on even so urgent a matter as assisting a fraternal socialist state under imperialist attack. Finally, the Soviet leaders may well be reluctant to accept what they judge to be a substantial risk of US interdiction at some point of an attempt to supply North Vietnam by sea. They almost certainly would fear a repetition of Khrushchev's disastrous

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backdown in the face of the US naval quarantine in the Cuban missile crisis.

8. In addition to these considerations, it is possible that the long delay in the appearance of promised Soviet military assistance in North Vietnam reflects a reassessment in Moscow of the risks and advantages of the post-Khrushchev effort to restore Soviet influence in Hanoi. Kosygin's painful experience in being "mouse-trapped" in Hanoi by the Viet Cong attack at Pleiku and apparent North Vietnamese opposition to further Soviet diplomatic initiatives to move the conflict toward negotiations may have caused second thoughts in the Kremlin about prospects for gaining greater leverage in Hanoi through a program of military aid.

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Aside from these reasons for greater

Soviet distrust of Hanoi's intentions, the sharp increase in the pace of US-South Vietnamese air strikes against North Vietnam may well have led the Russians to raise their estimate of the risks of a dangerous and possibly irreversible military involvement in the conflict.

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9. Although the Soviet leaders may thus be in a mood to temporize and possibly to scale down the military assistance they originally envisaged, they cannot afford to give the appearance of backing out of their public commitment to Hanoi. Soviet propaganda continues to maintain the fiction of progress toward Communist unity and to stress the need for "real actions" in Vietnam, as opposed to "loud statements." Moscow, therefore, probably still intends to proceed with at least a limited program of military assistance to North Vietnam after the alleged transit difficulties have been resolved and the Soviets decide they have exhausted the theme of Chinese obstructionism.

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quoted high Soviet officials as asserting that Soviet military equipment is now en route to North Vietnam under an agreement concluded in Peiping to clear up certain "procedural" obstructions which had developed over the manner in which Soviet military aid was to be delivered.

11. If such an agreement has, in fact, been signed, it probably means that the Soviets have found no way to avoid at least tacitly acknowledging China's right to establish conditions and routes for Soviet shipments, with the implied right to interrupt this traffic in the event of actual or alleged Soviet violations of the agreement. Even assuming that such an understanding will now open the way for a limited amount of Soviet military assistance to go forward, this will not dispose of the matter. Any formal agreement almost certainly will be the subject of conflicting interpretations that will lead to new charges and counter-charges.

12. The North Vietnamese could be expected to be extremely upset to find the question of aid being used as a cats-paw in the Sino-Soviet struggle. While there is no hard evidence that Hanoi is in fact angry at one party or the other for their part in this situation, there are hints appearing in its propaganda that it is not happy with the amount or kind of military aid it is now receiving. In early March Hanoi was categorizing the US actions as an effort to deter the North Vietnamese from supporting the "South Vietnamese

people." At the same time, the DRV began to categorize the US action as a "direct challenge to the entire socialist camp," suggesting an effort to elicit further and faster military assistance from Moscow and Peiping. A sense of impatience with the level and pace of foreign support was also evident in a concurrent Nhan Dan editorial statement that if the people of the world do not check the US acts against the DRV "in time" there would be an "unlimited disaster" not only in Indochina but in wider areas.

13. Throughout most of the remainder of March, Hanoi continued to pick up and rebroadcast public Soviet references to its promised aid and to otherwise play up the "backing" that the DRV was receiving from the socialist camp. During the past week, however, this note has receded in DRV propaganda and more emphasis has been put on the theme of the need for "self-reliance." On 7 April a meeting of the Fatherland Front, Hanoi's mass organization which serves as the focal point for expressions of unity with the Liberation Front in the south, put heavy stress on the need for "self-reliance." This theme also prominently figured in the Council of Ministers session of 4 April.

14. The slight shift noted in the DRV's current propaganda, while still in the formative stage, might reflect Hanoi's belief that the promised foreign assistance will not soon be available in the forms and quantities earlier expected.

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Approved For Release 2004/10/08 : CIA-RDP79T00472A000700020023-5

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Approved For Release 2004/10/08 : CIA-RDP79T00472A000700020023-5